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Regime Change, Deferred: Regarding United States' Foreign Policy in Syria

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Rosa Mazza-Hilway is a graduating senior majoring in Political Science with minors in English and Philosophy. She is an attorney on the Mock Trial team at Seton Hall University. Post undergraduate, she plans on attending law school, and is currently in the admission process. A United States Foreign Policy course inspired her paper, which explores why the United States has failed to successfully pursue the deposition of the Assad regime in Syria.

In 2011, President Obama proclaimed, “the time has come for President Assad to step aside” (“President Obama”). The question then becomes: why has the United States failed to act upon this declaration and been unsuccessful in achieving regime change in Syria? While there is evidence to suggest regime change is the ultimate goal in Syria, there has been a lack of action taken to facilitate the deposition of Assad. In this paper, there will be an emphasis on the policies and rhetoric that indicate the desire to catalyze a shift in governmental power through the disposal of the Assad regime. This approach will conceptualize the attempt to prove the discrepancies between the ideals of the United States and the actions taken by the nation. A historical approach will be employed to highlight the main policies, statements, and events which shaped the United States’ promotion of regime change in Syria. This approach will be organized by presidential terms, beginning with Obama’s first term, moving to his second term, and progressing towards Trump’s first term and the current state of affairs. This paper will consequently employ theories of foreign policy, to explain the Syrian situation from a theoretical standpoint. The theories of realism and liberalism will be employed while the ideals of both theoretical frameworks will be traced through foreign policy decisions, policies, and actions. Ultimately, these foreign policy theories will be rejected as the determining factor in the United States’ failure to pursue Syrian regime change.

This paper will argue that public opinion is the most significant factor which has shaped United

States’ foreign policy in Syria. Ultimately, the overwhelming public opposition to sustained military intervention will be isolated as the determining factor and analyzed in terms of affecting the foreign policy decisions of both President Obama and Trump. Numerous public opinion polls will be presented to conceptualize this phenomenon and explain the importance of the factor in the development of foreign policy. It will then be clear that public opinion is the answer to the question of United States inaction involving pursuing regime change in Syria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous political scientists have authored articles offering possible explanations for the inaction in U.S. foreign policy regarding regime change in Syria. These academics acknowledge the vast amount of evidence, which suggests foreign policy interests of intervention to facilitate the deposition of Assad. They highlight the discrepancies between theory and rhetoric, to underscore the inconsistency between the United States’ goals and foreign policy initiatives with instances of action which support these policies. Trent Mota introduces the claim that the theory of liberalism is responsible for the inconsistencies in his, “The Syria Problem” (Mota). Mota attributes the influence of liberalism as a theory of international relations, to the lack of military action taken in Syria. Specifically, he focuses upon Obama’s rejection of sustained military intervention in the Syrian conflict (Mota). Mota attributes the lack of action in Syria, to the fear of the Obama administration in incurring

repercussions from direct military involvement. Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini's argument in his "Discursive double-legitimation of (avoiding) another war in Obama's 2013 address on Syria" similarly expands on this argument, unpacking the extent of the inaction in Syrian foreign policy (Mirhosseini). His argument also focuses on the policies of the Obama administration in conjunction with a discussion of liberalism. Mirhosseini discusses the influence of liberalism upon the Syrian conflict and U.S. foreign policy. Specifically, his paper focuses on the discrepancies between the realist rhetoric of President Obama in comparison to the liberal policies and actions which were enacted (Mirhosseini). Both authors analyze the prescriptions of liberalism and their effects on foreign policy, describing the basic ideological claims which conflict with the possibility of regime change.

A large consensus in the literature attributes the survival of the Syrian regime to internal factors, such as the lack of opposition toward Assad's rule as well as the inability for successful protests against the regime. Elie Elhadj is one writer who supports this claim as he articulates in his article, "Why Syria's regime is likely to survive" (Elhadj). Elhadj acknowledges the necessity for a successful protest and rebellion period in order to catalyze a change in regime. He maintains that this necessary factor is unlikely to occur in Syria, presenting evidence that Syria will not experience a change in government (Elhadj). He cites the willingness of Syria's security forces, or the Alawi community, to kill demonstrators in order to put down protests, as an example of the lack of possibility for a successful anti-regime movement (Elhadj). Daniel Byman's article, "Regime Change in the Middle East: Problems and Prospects" presents a similar argument (Byman). Byman focuses on locating the differences between the Syrian situation when compared to other Arab countries with corrupt regimes. He identifies the ever-growing number of protests and protesters in Syria against external influence (including regime change) as one of the main factors (Byman). Specifically, Byman argues the demonstrations' tendency to end in mass murder as one of the factors that makes the Syrian situation more distinct. His ultimate argument is that regimes,

such as Syria's, will be sensitive towards any foreign policy steps that might delegitimize their government (Byman). Bassam Haddad also reaches a similar conclusion in his article, "Syria's Stalemate: The Limits of Regime Resilience" (Haddad). Haddad acknowledges the desire for regime change in the United States among other countries, but looks to the internal opposition in Syria to explain the reasons for delay. He maintains that the anti-intervention camp has grown due to the very possible reality that foreign military intervention would lead to total war (Haddad).

Using a broader perspective, Nesam McMillan and David Mickler introduce the doctrines of the Responsibility to Protect and the International Criminal Court as explanations for the inconsistencies in regime changes, in their article "From Sudan to Syria: Locating 'Regime Change' in R2P and the ICC" (McMillan, Nesam and David Mickler). They propose that the inaction surrounding regime change in Syria, stems from the broader legal and political uncertainties of regime change in general. What constitutes legitimate regime change is the first question identified. The second major question concerns the relationship between traditions associated with sovereignty and global humanitarianism (McMillan, Nesam and David Mickler). Nesam and Mickler further attribute these discrepancies and questions the vagueness inherent in the R2P doctrine and the ICC statute. The ambiguity is also charged as the cause of problems in the practice of regime change, as well as for the legitimacy of the new government/ governing institutions. The incoherence in the doctrines, as well as the inability to reconcile the ambiguous doctrines between themselves, is further cited to explain the difference between past regime changes and Syria's current situation (McMillan, Nesam and David Mickler).

Randa Slim proposes a different analysis of the Syrian situation, in her article, "Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior" (Slim). She looks to the longstanding ties between Hezbollah and the Syrian elite, specifically the House of Assad, in order to explain the United States' policy, or lack thereof, regarding regime change (Slim). Slim argues that Hezbollah's

immense presence in the region acts as a deterrent for the United States to pursue direct military action. The administration must consider the possible repercussions of waging war with Syria and Hezbollah, as unintended consequences of military action in Syria (Slim).

Jason Brownlee, in his piece “...And Yet They persist: Explaining Survival and Transition in Neopatrimonial Regimes” introduces the argument of patrimonial authority and the strength to resist regime change, which is inherent in some governments (Brownlee). He uses the variable “hard-liner” strength to measure the relationship between certain regimes and foreign influence (Brownlee 36). Utilizing the case studies of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia, Brownlee concludes that the endurance of the regimes can be attributed to the ability of authoritarian incumbents to underscore opposition movements, when unimpeded by foreign influence (Brownlee). Therefore, Brownlee attributes the success of regime changes to an undermined patrimonial network. Because Syria’s patrimonial regime has flourished, despite foreign efforts, Brownlee argues the regime can and will continue to sustain itself, excluding the possibility of regime change efforts by the United States (Brownlee).

UNDERSTANDING THE SYRIAN SITUATION

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings led to the beginning of the conflict in Syria, as anti-authoritarian forces advocating for the adoption of democracy formed in countries across the Middle East (Al Jazeera). In Syria, the formation of anti-Assad rebel groups addressed the crippling economy as well as the lack of freedom and human rights under the dictatorship. The Assad regime responded to the democratic movements, with violence, destruction, and the abuse of human rights (Al Jazeera). The formation of the leading anti-Assad rebel group, the Free Syrian Army, led to the rise of tensions between the government and rebel groups, resulting in the Syrian Civil War (Al Jazeera). The initial civil war has evolved into a large-scale conflict involving international powers, religion, terrorism, and humanitarian crises. The creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant are examples of the extreme response to the conflict and destruction between the Syrian rebel

forces and the Syrian government (Al Jazeera). Currently, the extent of the United States’ military intervention in Syria is solely focused on destroying ISIS, removed from the pursuit of regime change or shifting the balance of power in the region (Al Jazeera).

The United States’ primary motivation for supporting Syrian rebel groups is the promotion of democracy and the destruction of authoritarian regimes, specifically Assad’s rule in Syria (“Syrian Civil War.”). The United States was founded on core democratic beliefs such as sovereignty, liberty, and freedoms- rights which are secured within the Constitution. The inherent liberalism of the nation emphasizes the desire for promotion of rights and liberties, through the practice of democratic promotion. In response to the deprivation of rights and corrupt authoritarian governments in other countries, the United States has championed democratic promotion (through processes ranging from securing free elections to the installation of new democracies) (Stuster). The United States has supported other rebel groups and facilitated the regime changes in other countries involved in the Arab Spring uprisings, including Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen. In a broader analysis of the world, the United States has overseen the military coups of other governments throughout history (Stuster). Some of these countries include Brazil, Chile, the Congo, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Iran, and South Vietnam. While many of these instances of political intervention were carried out through covert CIA operations, the United States has a proven pattern in regards to deposing of brutal dictatorships and installing pro-American, democratic governments (Stuster). Since the operations, the United States has taken credit and publicly acknowledged the actions and depositions, ultimately championing the spread of democracy and rights (Stuster). This historical precedent paved the way for the United States’ intervention in the Syrian civil war and in deposing the Assad regime.

The Syrian civil war has sparked action from the international community, including international organizations such as the UN, as well as other countries. The regime’s violence against its citizens has prompted not only the United

States, but the United Nations to impose punishments upon the country (“Syrian Civil War.”). International interference has been necessary to respond to the imprisonment, torture, and murder of protesters, as well as the use of chemical weapons against civilians in Syria. The international community has also responded through the alliance with the rebel groups as well as the Syrian government (“Syrian Civil War.”). Specifically, the United States has provided support, both politically and militarily, to the rebel Syrian forces as a representation of its censure of the dictatorship (“A Look at US Involvement in Syria.”). Assad’s regime is supported politically and militarily by both Russia and Iran. Groups such as Hezbollah, ISIS, and the Russian army have sided with Assad and supported the government in the Syrian conflict (Al Jazeera). While there are influences and opposing forces within Syria, the international community and external influences present in the region also contribute to the totality of the conflict.

The humanitarian crisis in Syria further constitutes a larger reason for the United States’ interference in the country, invoking the Responsibility to Protect (“A Look at US Involvement in Syria.”). The Responsibility to Protect has been signed by numerous countries, mostly those comprising the United Nations, and constitutes a global commitment for aid in the face of atrocities. The four key concerns that it addresses include preventing genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (“Responsibility to Protect.”). Ultimately, the doctrine is centered around violations of human rights and mass atrocities. While it is considered a measure of last resort, in the face of a country in violation of any or all of the four key concerns, action is seen as legally required and permissible (“Responsibility to Protect.”). Assad’s use of chemical weapons is a direct violation of the key concerns of the doctrine, warranting an international response. Consequently, the United Nations has been an active mediator in the Syrian crisis, and the United States has followed suit in most situations, helping to impose and enforce economic sanctions and military intervention (“Syrian Civil War.”). However, due to international disagreement,

larger scale intervention consisting of Syrian occupation by multiple nations, has been prevented. While R2P has been used to rationalize regime change, for example in the case of Libya, the doctrine has not been utilized effectively in Syria (“Responsibility to Protect.”). In theory, the doctrine could be used to justify larger- scale military operations in Syria, in order to prevent the mass atrocities and violations of human rights. Because of the precedent of using R2P to justify regime change, it is also quite possible to use the doctrine to facilitate the deposition of Assad.

The United States has responded to the threats of terrorism, specifically regarding ISIS and its reign in Syria, through military intervention in Syria. However, despite the numerous reasons which would justify the forced removal of the Assad regime, Assad’s dictatorship has survived.

THE PRESIDENCY OF BARACK OBAMA

Over the course of President Obama’s presidencies, there were numerous factors which suggested the United States’ foreign policy goal in Syria was regime change. The Syrian conflict peaked during his presidencies, in terms of actual physical conflict, the international community’s concern, public concern and media coverage (“The Syrian Conflict”). There was a heightened sense of expectancy for the President to exert his power and influence over Syria in order to either resolve the conflict or take action in order to mediate the situation. Examples of the President’s own actions and promises that would suggest regime change include Obama’s protest for Assad to step down from power, the declaration of his “red line” doctrine, and the pursuit of military airstrikes on the region (“A Look at US Involvement in Syria.”). His own administration included many outspoken influences in the creation of foreign policy, or those advocating for the overthrow of the Syrian regime. Despite these aspects of his presidencies which suggested there would be a strong influence pushing for regime change, very little action was taken. While the United States did pursue punitive measures upon the regime for the abuse of human rights, the Obama administration exercised very limited military intervention (“Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). Obama’s declared goal of regime change was very limitedly

pursued during his administration and ultimately left in the past after his presidential terms.

In 2011, leaders of numerous countries around the world, including Angela Merkel of Germany and David Cameron of the United Kingdom called on Assad to resign from power in Syria. Barack Obama followed suit and formally called on Assad to “step down ‘for the sake of the Syrian people’” (“Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). The demand for Assad’s resignation influenced public opinion and shaped the official foreign policy agenda. In 2012, Obama referred to Assad’s use of chemical weapons against his own people as a “red line” (“A Look at US Involvement in Syria.”). The “red line” doctrine labeled the transportation or use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government as cause for military intervention by the United States. The ultimatum acted as a threat of force to the Assad regime, as the administration could either cooperate and prevent further chemical weapons attacks in Syria or refuse to submit and face military consequences (“A Look at US Involvement in Syria.”). Obama was pressured to act on his “red line” doctrine in August of 2013, following the chemical weapons attacks on rebels in Damascus, resulting in the death of nearly 1,500 citizens (Mayer). Obama responded with a proposal for limited military intervention, which he presented before Congress. However, Obama faced Congressional dissent, provoking him to reevaluate his options, including military involvement (Mayer). Presented with two courses of action concerning the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria: the first choice of utilizing military force through airstrikes or the second of pursuing diplomatic negotiations to more effectively reduce the abundance of chemical weapons, Obama favored the second approach (“A Look at US Involvement in Syria.”). While acting in accordance with his “red line” doctrine would have meant the pursuit of the first military approach, Obama defaulted to the pursuit of cooperation, going against his rhetoric which suggested military involvement.

Under President Obama, the United States began supporting the Free Syrian Army, or the rebel forces opposed Assad’s dictatorship, another example which suggest the United States’ desire to

conduct military operations in Syria (“A Look at US Involvement in Syria.”). The objective of the Free Syrian army was to depose Assad through armed operations (“The Syrian Conflict”). The army was largely constructed and supported by foreign actors, including the United States. Security officials from the United States, alongside officials from other countries, facilitated the election of military commanders and representatives in the army (“Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). Along with elections, the United States sent officials to train these officers in military strategies and tactics. The Obama administration also provided weapons, artillery and financial aid to the rebel groups (“Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). Later, the creation of the New Syrian Army, a rebel group branching from the Free Syrian Army, further presented an opportunity for military intervention and regime change in Syria (“The Syrian Conflict”). While the forces eventually dissolved and formed the Revolutionary Commando Army, many of the commanders and soldiers of the army previously received training from the United States’ military. The United States’ role in supporting and leading the opposition groups to Assad’s regime, would suggest the United States’ goal was concurrent with the rebel groups. The rebel groups specifically formed in order to oversee the deposition of Assad, meaning the United States recognized and assumed this goal when military officials chose to support the Free Syrian Army. However, while the Obama administration took extensive measures to ensure these groups would be prepared and organized to prove effective in their opposition to Assad, Obama never acted further upon regime change.

Numerous notable officials comprising the Obama administration advocated for military intervention as an introduction to a more active role for the United States in Syria, as they attempted to facilitate Syrian regime change. One of the strongest condemnations of the Assad regime came from Obama’s Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton (“Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). Clinton advocated for larger scale military operations in Syria during Obama’s terms, and has continued to be a vocal

proponent of sustained military intervention, denouncing the legitimacy of the Syrian government. Obama's first two defense secretaries, Robert M. Gates and Leon E. Panetta, heralded the opposition to Obama's retracted foreign policy, arguing he was attempting to micromanage the military ("Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration."). They advocated for the greater allowance of power to the military to carry out operatives in Syria, to further advance the process of deposing Assad. Obama's third defense secretary, Chuck Hagel, furthered this trend as a vocal proponent of military attacks against Assad (Bertrand). Hagel proposed numerous plans for military strikes and intervention, which were all consequently struck down by Obama (Bertrand). Hagel was frequently recorded stating that the United States was ready to take military action once the orders were given, clearly indicating the discrepancy between military personnel and the Commander in Chief- President Obama (Bertrand). Hagel objected to a mass ground deployment, and instead argued for a limited military engagement, in an attempt to persuade even the non-interventionists aligning with Obama ("Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration."). He believed that even this limited form of military action, which did not require mass deployment of American troops, could shift the balance of power against Assad and towards the rebel groups ("Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration."). He further pursued two different options in order to facilitate this change in power dynamics: arming the rebel groups against Assad, or using military strikes directed at the Syrian air force. Hagel argued either option would facilitate regime change from Assad to the rebel power groups, without requiring a full-scale invasion on behalf of the United States (Bertrand). While these options were heralded by Hagel and other advisors within the Obama administration, the policies were rejected by the President.

To understand the discrepancy between President Obama and some of his most prominent administrators, it is necessary to understand his role in shaping foreign policy. Tony Badran, a Middle Eastern researcher, explained the overarching role President Obama played in

shaping foreign policy toward Syria. Badran argues, "the US Syria policy has always been in the head of one man, and one man only: Barack Obama" (Bertrand). He further explains Obama's intentions, arguing he "never intended to remove Assad", explaining the United States' foreign policy as a reflection of this bias (Bertrand). Obama exercised his assumed executive power, by retaining the most influence in shaping American foreign policy (Bertrand). While these officials were influential components of Obama's administration, they were ultimately unsuccessful in gaining the support of President Obama. Obama's rejection of simply entertaining the idea of regime change, barred the existence of his administrator's opinions influencing his foreign policy (Bertrand). This key factor explains the discrepancy between the opinions of the personnel comprising the Obama administration, and the concrete policies of the United States (Bertrand). However, the explanation of Obama's use of non-interventionist policy despite the majority opinions of his advisors and administration, requires a more expansive understanding of the role of liberalism in Obama's determination of his foreign policy ideals.

President Obama's stance toward military intervention and the pursuit of regime change in Syria, was heavily influenced by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The long-lasting wars, the overwhelming commitment made by the United States' military in both of these countries, and the long-lasting effects of the wars, shaped the United States as a whole, not excluding the foreign policy of the presidential administration (Woodward). President Obama's speech concerning military strikes against Syria acknowledged these precedents while reflecting upon the effects of the conflicts. He explained his resistance towards intervention as he had previously "resisted calls for military action [in Syria] because we cannot resolve someone else's civil war through force" a conclusion he came to "after a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Staff, Washington Post). Using the hindsight acquired after the United States' invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama feared a military invasion of Syria would lead to a similar situation in another Middle Eastern country. He also reflected upon the mass casualties

and sacrifices made by the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan, again understanding the implications of the wars and failures (Woodward). Due to this history, Obama was precise with his actions and policies in order to prevent any prolonged conflict as he promised the American people he “[would] not pursue an open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan” (Staff, Washington Post). Regime change in Syria would most definitely classify itself as “open-ended conflict”, explaining the lack of action in that regard, due to fear of intervention leading to war (Staff, Washington Post). Therefore, Obama’s subsequent foreign policy concerning the Middle East was largely based on nonintervention. His tendency to favor inaction over intervention later extended to his foreign policy decisions in Syria. Because President Obama could be described as a liberal non-interventionist after the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the policies the United States embraced during his presidency coincided with the foreign policy theory of liberalism (Woodward).

Liberalism helped shaped United States’ foreign policy during the Obama administration emphasizing the sue of negotiation and cooperation over the exercise of military power. Regime change by the United States would require a large-scale military invasion and sustained intervention, or mass troop deployment. The emphasis on power and military in either of these situations, contrast with the ideals of President Obama. While he responded to public pressure when initiating his “red line” doctrine as well as airstrikes in order to enforce his previous assertions, he largely fell back from direct military action or intervention “Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). He repeatedly argued that there was “no military solution” to the Syrian conflict, continuing to advocate for a diplomatic settlement between the international powers (Mota).

The purpose of the declaration was to immediately address the concerns of the international community as well at the other prominent interventionists in the president’s administration. Obama’s true beliefs heralded liberalism and its emphasis on non-military answers. At the time in which he declared the “red

line’ in Syria, the only option available to President Obama presented itself as the use of force to enact punitive measures (“Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). However, a few days after Obama gave his ‘red line” speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin, offered to negotiate diplomacy between the United States and Syria (Mayer). Obama weighed the two options at hand, but ultimately chose to pursue diplomatic negotiations alongside Putin and Assad. His decision can largely be explained by the influence of his subscription to liberalism. While there may seem to be a discrepancy in the initiates of president Obama in Syria, it is clear that once the option of resolving the situation no longer involved direct military aggression on behalf of the United States, Obama was more inclined to agree to the summits and treaties (Mayer).

The G20 Summit was held between Putin and Obama to discuss the international control of Syrian chemical weapons. On September 14 of 2013, the “Framework for the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons” was finalized and published (“Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). This international treaty resulted from United States- Russian negotiations, or a reliance on the international system, to provide safety and security in Syria. This document called for Assad to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles by June of 2014 (“Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). The United States also relied on the power of the United Nations Security Council and its resolutions, in order to achieve its goals concerning the humanitarian crisis in Syria, without pursuing regime change. The UN Security Council Resolution 2118, stipulated that Syria would assume responsibility for the destruction of its chemical weapons as well as the chemical weapons facilities. The UN laid out an implementation plan requiring Syrian officials adherence to time restrictions and guidelines concerning the elimination of the administrations’ weapons (“Foreign Policy of the Barack Obama Administration.”). The diplomatic negotiations led to Syria’s introduction to the Chemical Weapons Convention as well as Assad’s cooperation with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The use of the international system and

diplomatic negotiations further proves the tendency for Obama's ideals to align with liberalism.

Liberalism's emphasis on cooperation over the use of military force or action, further explains Obama's decision to move from pursuing military intervention in Syria to embracing more peaceful, non-violent approaches. Obama supported political and diplomatic negotiations, not only in Syria, but these ideals were seen throughout his foreign policy initiatives in other countries as well. While the members of his administration arguing for direct military intervention, subscribed to the theory of realism, Obama's liberal ideals directly conflicted with the prescriptions of realism. This explains why Obama chose the latter of his two present options in shaping foreign policy in Syria, as the negotiations coincided with a liberal approach. The G20 Summit and the United States-Russian led negotiations were both examples of the utilization of the international system as well as the liberal tendency to promote non-interventionism. Liberalism emphasizes the use of international organizations and treaties, as these institutions can be effectively utilized in order to reduce anarchy in the international system. The key concept of cooperation helps underscore the importance of the use of these organizations, as states' actions can be mediated and manipulated through the use of negotiations and diplomacy. President Obama understood that the possibility for peaceful negotiations was superior to military intervention, as successful treaties would result in a much larger reduction of chemical weapons in Syria as opposed to inaccurate or potentially fatal airstrikes (Mayer).

While Obama's ideological preferences regarding theories of foreign policy, can be isolated as the contributing factor to preventing the United States from pursuing regime change, the case differs regarding Trump's presidency. Trump heralds the foreign policy theory of realism, as he emphasizes the use of power and the power dynamics inherent in the international system. Due to the fact that Trump does not subscribe to liberalism, there must be another answer to explain the question of failure in pursuing Syrian regime change.

THE PRESIDENCY OF DONALD TRUMP

While United States' foreign policy under President Obama was largely influenced through his adherence to liberalism, it has adapted to accommodate the ideals of President Trump. Due to President Trump's rejection of the theory of liberalism, he subsequently rejects liberal non interventionism, the policy which was hailed by Obama during his presidencies. In opposition, Trump's foreign policy is largely characterized by the theory of realism. Realism is the theory of international relations which emphasizes national interests, the role of the state and military power in world politics. President Trump's subscription to this theory explains his emphasis on states as the primary actors in the international system, his rejection of international organizations and the emphasis on hard power. While Trump's realist paradigm directly contradicts Obama's liberal paradigm, the policies of both administrations are surprisingly similar with regard to the Syrian crisis.

The Trump administration has been criticized for the lack of written, concise policies regarding the Syrian conflict (Krieg). While Trump has not formally declared his objectives in Syria, "the various foreign policy U-turns over the past four months suggest that there is no U.S. global strategy, let alone a strategy for the Middle East" (Krieg 145). This indicates that there has not been a clear strategy to which the Trump administration has relied upon in its proceedings with Syria. An explanation of this phenomenon relies upon an understanding of Trump's "America First" policy, with its strict focus on domestic policies as opposed to foreign policy has many implications, specifically on the crisis in Syria (Krieg). This policy is largely centered around the notion that the United States must first solidify its strength at home before it is able to shift its focus abroad. This explains Trump's focus on domestic policies in areas such as economics and trade within these first years of his administration. While many believed that Trump's repetition of "America First" and "Make America Great Again" would result in a strictly isolationist foreign policy, Trump's subscription to realism has prevented this isolationist perspective (Krieg). While there is still a lack of physical, written policy, Trump's ideals

can be inferred from his foreign policy interactions.

Syrian foreign policy under President Trump is focused upon two distinct goals. The first goal concerns fighting and destroying the presence of ISIS in the region, as well as crippling the entire organization itself (Krieg). One of the few foreign policy issues Trump addressed in his campaign for President was ISIS, which he deemed his primary foreign policy objective. The second goal the administration has outlined is resolving the chemical weapons violations of the Assad regime. Many of the strikes against the Syrian government have been to address this issue, provoking international action as well (Krieg). Because the Trump administration has only explored these two goals in Syria, regime change has been completely swept under the rug. The administration's goals are confined to the anti-terrorism and human rights objectives, barring the existence of conversation, let alone policy, regarding regime change in Syria (Niva). Currently, terrorism is the forefront issue, whether that changes in the future due to successful attacks against ISIS, could possibly change the current situation of the Assad regime (Niva).

The Trump administration's policies regarding the United States military as well as the ideals concerning power are in accordance with Trump's subscription to the foreign policy theory of realism. Trump champions the use of hard power, such as aggressive displays of military might, and the use of threat. President Trump emphasizes the importance of America retaining its position as "the world's preeminent military power" (Popescu 98). In order to solidify this position he has advocated for the "rebuilding and modernizing" of the military which previously had been obstructed by Obama's liberal leanings (Popescu 98). Trump has called for an increase in military spending, in order to continue the build-up of the army. The budget for defense spending is one of the largest allocations of spending money the military has ever seen (Popescu). Trump is a firm believer in the existence of an expansive, well-maintained military, and the large amount of spending devoted to the military will allow for the solidification of power and ability. This action not only acts as a display of power, but it shifts the

balance of power in favor of the United States when compared to the Islamic State, as the U.S. has more military might (Popescu).

Trump's emphasis on power can also be seen through the increased military strikes in Syria. "Conventional bombing and drone strikes have significantly increased under Trump" with the goal of targeting and eradicating ISIS from the region (Niva 3). President Trump's policy concerning Syria is often referred to as "annihilation tactics" due to the large-scale attacks as well as the frequency of these military strikes (Niva 3). Trump has already dropped a record number of bombs on the Middle East, specifically Syria, increasing by roughly 10 percent when compared to his predecessors (Niva). The two major airstrikes conducted under the Trump administration to date, were the April 2017 and April 2018 attacks.

In April 2017, the United States received reports of chemical weapon attacks in Douma, Syria. The reports showed signs of exposure to chlorine and sarin gas, resulting in the death of dozens of civilians, including women and children ("Syrian Civil War."). While Syria and Russia denied any involvement in the attack, the horrifying images and casualty reports from the attacks provoked an international response ("Syrian Civil War."). The importance of the chemical attack was underscored due to the Obama administration's diplomatic efforts alongside Russia to shut down the weapons facilities and destroy the remaining chemical weapons in Syria. The ability of the Assad regime to carry out the attacks emphasized the failure of the previous administration to hinder Assad's chemical weapons power, or to successfully deter his further actions ("Syrian Civil War."). Trump recognized these discrepancies, catalyzing his decision to resort to the exercise of military power. On Friday, April 7 of 2017, the Trump administration delivered multiple attacks in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime ("Syrian Civil War."). The targets of the missiles were associated with the chemical weapons program of Syria, including a scientific research center as well as a chemical weapons storage facility. The United States fired 59 TLAMs, or Tomahawk cruise missiles at these facilities and in the specific areas in order to emphasize the

objective of the attacks as well as create the most possible consequences for Assad concerning his violation of international law (“Syrian Civil War”). On April 14th of 2018, the United States alongside France and the United Kingdom, launched more airstrikes against the Assad regime in response to subsequent chemical weapons attacks on Syrian civilians (“Syrian Civil War.”). The reports detailed a chemical attack on a Damascus suburb. Once again, the attack zones were limited to those associated with the construction, development, or holding of chemical weapons (“Syrian Civil War.”).

The military strikes conducted by the United States on the Assad regime were defended on the basis of two objectives of intervention. The first objective was to impose a punishment on the Assad regime for the chemical weapons attacks. The second objective was to deter Assad from using chemical weapons once again in future attacks. Trump was determined to strategically use the strikes to impair Assad’s ability to continue producing chemical weapons, as well as possibly prevent him from exercising future attacks upon his civilian population (“Syrian Civil War”). He vocalized these goals in an address to the public which he stated that the attacks were carried out in order “to establish a strong deterrent against the production, spread and use of chemical weapons” by the Assad regime (“Statement by President Trump on Syria”). The second round of airstrikes carried out in 2018, were designed to inflict much more damage than the 2017 attacks, due to Assad’s persistence in the usage of chemical weapon warfare (“Syrian Civil War”). The increased use of missiles reflects this change in attitude, as the attacks were no longer solely for the purpose of installing fear at the hands of a threat, but to cripple Assad’s forces. However, the strikes were limited in their objectives, to focusing upon the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The strikes were not designed or carried out to facilitate the deposition of Assad, or even to aid the rebel groups against the regime. The strikes, in theory, and in practice, were targeted to answering the question of chemical warfare and providing repercussions for the Assad regime.

When commenting on the extent of the United States retaliation against the Assad regime, Trump contended that the United States would be “prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use of prohibited chemical agents” (“Statement by President Trump on Syria”). When asked if the United States through the Trump administration would pursue any further action in Syria after the military strikes, Defense Secretary, Jim Mattis, focused his answer on the subsequent actions of the Assad regime. He stated that the United States’ future actions would “depend on Mr. Assad should he decide to use more chemical weapons in the future” (“Briefing by Secretary Mattis on U.S. Strikes in Syria.”). These answers reveal two very significant factors in understanding the foreign policy initiatives of the Trump administration regarding Syria. The first factor is the focus on the chemical weapons issue in Syria. The second is the reactive policy, as opposed to a proactive foreign policy. Because the goals of the administration are clearly aligned and have been specifically highlighted, it is possible to understand the lack of U.S. military action regarding Syrian regime change. The Trump administration is not attempting to pursue military action to provoke regime change, but rather to punish the Syrian government for the violation of human rights through the chemical weapons attacks against Syrian citizens.

While the Trump administration has not shied away from pursuing military intervention and initiatives against ISIS in Syria, it has not utilized these same initiatives in its interactions with Assad. “Inaction”, the word, which best describes United States foreign policy regarding regime change in Syria, cannot be used to describe the majority of foreign policy initiatives of President Trump. This inherent discrepancy between Trump’s foreign policy regarding ISIS and the lack of action taken to facilitate the deposition of Assad, provokes a question into the cause of the inconsistencies. While liberalism has been rejected as the answer to understanding this discrepancy, there must be another viable answer to understanding this phenomenon. In light of this rejection, this paper will turn towards isolating the consistent variable in both President Obama and Trump’s administrations.

DETERMINING FACTOR

One of the consistent factors between both of the Obama presidencies and the Trump presidency to date, is public opinion regarding United States intervention in Syria. During all three presidential terms, a majority of the public opinion polls indicated a strong resistance to military intervention. These polls and charts will be presented in order to analyze the correlation between public opinion and the actions taken by the United States military as well the effects on the policies of the presidential administrations.

Much of the public opposition to military intervention in Syria can be ascribed to the previous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the height of the Syrian crisis, these past wars were still fresh in the minds of American citizens, biasing them against any actions of the United States which could possibly lead to yet another war or prolonged conflict (“The Syrian Dilemma”). “so much of the aversion to intervention...has been predicated on Syria’s supposed similarity to Iraq and fear of entering into another quagmire” (“The Syria Dilemma” 24). This constant fear in Americans’ minds partially explains the overwhelming opposition to any military intervention in Syria. The mishaps and extended stays in both Iraq and Afghanistan hurt the public’s reliance on the U.S. government to provide limited assistance without mass deployment. Therefore, not only was the public biased against small scale operations in Syria, but the full-scale military invasion needed to facilitate the deposition of Assad was completely off the table.

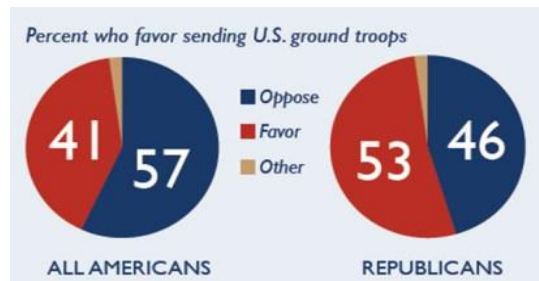
The influence of public approval can be seen in President Obama’s request for congressional authorization to approve the airstrikes in Syria. Mayer describes the power of the President as commander-in-chief, and his ability to conduct the airstrikes in Syria without asking for a formal certification of approval (Mayer). She refers to Obama’s action as “unprecedented” as “there are no other instances of a President asking for advance congressional approval for an attack of this scale” (Mayer 827). This significant request by the President further emphasizes the importance he placed upon public and administrative approval for military intervention in Syria. This request is

even more significant as during this time in the Syrian conflict, the public was more intensely biased against conducting strikes. In fact, The Washington Post found that there were “263 House members against or leaning against, and only 25 expressing public support” for the strikes, while in the Senate the count was “23 in favor and 43 against or leaning against” (Mayer). This overwhelming disapproval towards the strikes accurately represents the American public’s opposition to military intervention in Syria as well. In response to Obama’s proposal for airstrikes he stated that he was “also mindful that I’m the president of the world’s oldest constitutional democracy”, explaining the core liberal policies which largely influenced his decisions and inaction (Staff, Washington Post). This also explains his reliance on Congressional approval instead of the use of his executive power as commander-in-chief. While President Obama could potentially have ordered the military airstrikes on Syria without the assent of the House or Senate, his devotion to the democratic process led to his proposal to Congress. This emphasis on democracy also explains the subsequent hesitancy displayed by President Obama in suggesting military interference in Syria, as after the proposal failed, Obama looked for alternative solutions to the conflict.

The Brookings Institution published an expansive survey regarding the American public’s attitudes toward Syria, specifically focusing on ISIS. The study was conducted with a sample of 1008 American adults in November of 2014, during Obama’s second term (Telhami). Some of the key findings of the surveys concluded that Americans also perceived ISIS as the biggest threat in the Middle East, and therefore the expected forefront foreign policy issue of the U.S. (Telhami). The survey also found that if the airstrikes conducted by the international community, including the United States, failed to destroy ISIS, a majority of those polled would still oppose deploying ground forces in Syria. The graph below represents the poll results of the question, showing that 57% of the sample size opposed sending troops into Syria, with the objective of fighting ISIS (Telhami). This specific graph also shows the discrepancies between

Republicans and Democrats with regard to favoring or opposing military intervention.

The Brookings Institute



The survey asked follow-up questions regarding military operations in Syria, and the removal of the Assad regime. The Brookings Institute found that Americans were ultimately opposed to any military operations with “72% opposing and 25% supporting such operations” (Telhami). While there were strong anti-Assad sentiments expressed throughout the questions, both parties came to very similar conclusions regarding United States military action.

Gallup conducted a public opinion poll in September of 2013, asking questions related to United States foreign policy, with a focus on the Syrian conflict. The poll was taken among 1,038 American adults in all of the 50 states. The poll followed President Obama’s speech regarding the chemical weapons stockpiles in Syria, detailing possible plans to supervise the Assad regime and ensure the destruction of the chemical weapons (“A Look at US Involvement in Syria.”). The survey was conducted twice, within the span of a week. Within this week, the survey found that the public’s opposition to military strikes in Syria had risen from “51%” to “62%” (Gallup, Inc). The survey also found that the support for military intervention in Syria dropped from “36% to 28%” within that same week (Gallup, Inc).

Gallup, Inc.

Americans' Views on Military Intervention in Syria

Would you favor or oppose the U.S. taking military action against Syria in order to reduce that country’s ability to use chemical weapons?

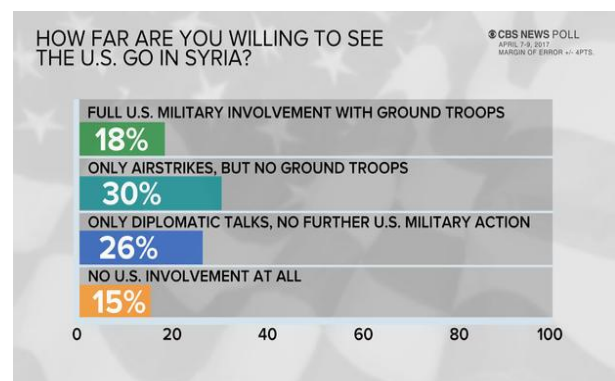
	% Favor	% Oppose	% No opinion
Sep 11-12, 2013	28	62	11
Sep 3-4, 2013	36	51	13

GALLUP

This poll highlights the complicated nature of the American public’s reactions and opinions regarding the Syrian conflict. The public’s views are both impressionable and dynamic as within a week, support and opposition numbers fluctuated in response to the unfolding events. However, while fluctuation is inevitable, the poll highlights the overwhelming opposition to military intervention.

A poll conducted this past April by CBS News surveyed 1,006 American adults concerning Trump’s foreign policy in Syria (CBS News). When asked “How far are you willing to see the U.S. go in Syria” only 18% responded with ground troops and a full-scale military invasion (CBS News). While there was much more support amongst those polled for airstrikes, when compared to those polls presented previously during Obama’s administration, there is not overwhelming public support for military involvement.

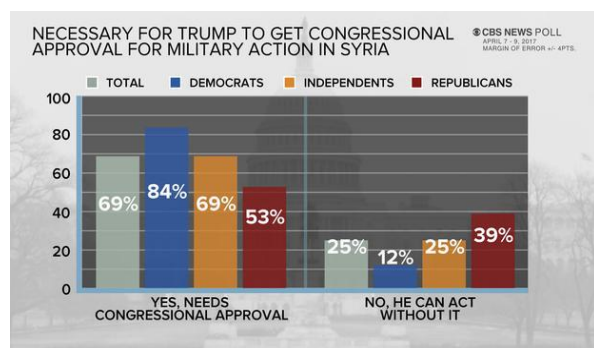
CBS News



Democratic involvement and representation is emphasized in the next question presented by the poll. When asked “Do you think it is necessary for Congress to approve any further U.S. military action in Syria, or do you think Donald Trump has

the authority to take further military action in Syria without getting approval of Congress?” the results were as followed (CBS News).

CBS News



Seven in ten Americans underscore the necessity for Trump to receive authorization from Congress before pursuing further action in Syria (CBS News). This poll indicates the American public's emphasis on representation of views and the democratic process. While President Trump has the power of commander-in-chief and can potentially initiate attacks on Syria without the approval of Congress or the public, Americans are highly opposed to this option (CBS News). Therefore, it is necessary for the president to rely upon the public ratings for decisions in foreign policy, as if Trump were to conduct attacks without authorization, his public approval rating would be greatly damaged. The American public has succeeded in attributing a greater importance to their opinions, as is seen through Obama's proceedings.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the Syrian conflict, United States foreign policy has largely remained stagnant regarding regime change. While there is evidence of the United States' goal of removing Assad from power, there has been very little action taken to reach this goal or facilitate the removal of Assad from Syria's presidency. Despite the denouncement of the Assad regime at numerous points in time throughout the Syrian conflict, the examples of "action" taken by the U.S. are in the form of rhetoric or empty promises. The U.S. has failed to pursue any solid foreign policy plans

regarding the deposition of Assad, under both the Obama and Trump administrations. The United States' influence and intervention in Syria has been fixated on either the fight against terrorism and ISIS or the conflict regarding chemical weapons. While the U.S. has taken the initiative in certain circumstances and sent military officials, troops, and even conducted numerous airstrikes, the extent of foreign policy plans stop there. The intent to remove Assad has been in place since Obama's first presidential term, and regime change remains possible, yet U.S. foreign policy to date has proved ineffective in achieving regime change.

The foreign policy theories of liberalism and realism are inadequate answers to the question of why the United States has failed to depose the Assad regime despite the goal of Syrian regime change. It is clear that many of President Obama's initiatives coincided with the foundational points of liberalism, due to his identification as a liberal non interventionist and his subscription to liberalism. This subscription is seen through his emphasis on diplomatic negotiations with the Assad regime and the lack of military strikes conducted in Syria. Liberalism can further explain his hesitancy to facilitate regime change in Syria due to the necessity to use power politics and rely upon military strength, elements of the theory of realism. While the influence of the theory of liberalism is partially responsible for the lack of military intervention in Syria during Obama's terms, liberalism cannot account for the inaction during the Trump presidency. Therefore, liberalism is rejected as the determining factor and answer to the inaction of the United States in deposing Assad from power in Syria.

Despite Trump's subscription to realism and his emphasis on power politics, the United States has abandoned the promise to remove Assad. Trump has not hesitated in using military force against the Syrian regime in response to prolonged chemical weapons attacks by the Assad administration. Trump has also denounced Assad's actions and reiterated his interest in punishing and reforming the Assad regime. Despite, Trump's emphasis on power and military intervention, the Assad regime remains in the same state as during Obama's presidential terms.

In fact, Trump's failure to facilitate Syrian regime change directly contrasts with his subscription to realism. Therefore, both realism and liberalism cannot completely account for the inaction inherent in U.S. foreign policy towards Syria.

Due to the drastic difference in subscription to theories of foreign policy between Obama's presidential terms and Trump's presidency, the common denominator between the two sheds light on answering the overarching question of the paper. The common factor between the presidencies, and answer to the question of Syrian regime change, is public opinion. While liberalism and realism have shaped United States foreign policy, the reason the U.S. has not pursued the deposition of Assad, is due to the over-arching effect of public opinion. Throughout the three presidential terms, public opinion remains largely opposed to large-scale military intervention in Syria, including regime change. Obama and Trump were both aware of the public opinions regarding Syria, shaping their foreign policy plans and their administration's actions. Because public polls repeatedly emphasized the hostility towards military intervention, the idea of regime change in and of itself was deemed implausible due to the public outcry it would provoke. The publicity surrounding the Syrian conflict from its origination has made Assad's regime a forefront issue, one that both Obama and Trump have recognized warrants extreme precision and care in proceedings. The findings of this paper conclude that public opinion is the determining factor in explaining the United States inaction in pursuing regime change in Syria, due to the majority public opposition to regime change.

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